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The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas.

By Thomas Waugh

Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press 2006. ISBN: 0-7735-3146-7. 599 pp. £15.99 (pbk)

A Review by Sarah Artt, Napier University, UK

The foreword to this book is by Bruce LaBruce, one of Canada's queer vanguard, an artist and critic who operates in multiple artistic fields. LaBruce's work is cited throughout the book as exemplary of queer Canadian cinema, bridging the gap between the underground avant-garde and pornography. His foreword is witty and flattering, and introduces the (perhaps surprising) breadth of Thomas Waugh's book, a study of cinema long considered niche or marginal to both the film industry and academia. *The Romance of Transgression* is exhaustive in its chronicling of some of the most exciting and sometimes obscure efforts of Canada's queer filmmakers. Finally, Waugh's personalised but highly engaging writing style suits his material, and provides some much-needed comic leverage in a book of this size.

One thing that is immediately remarkable about Waugh's book is his determination to tackle Canadian queer cinema in both official languages of English and French, and his desire to "view Canadian cinema as a matrix of three metropolitan sub-cinemas situated in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, without denying the lights of the regional arts hinterlands of Atlantic Canada and the Prairies" (12). This lack of a single linguistic or geographical bias makes Waugh's book doubly ambitious.

Waugh also introduces what may well be the ultimate acronym, BLLAGTITTISQQ:

bisexual, lesbian, leather, asexual/celibate, gay, transsexual, intersex, transgendered, two-spirited, intergenerational, sex-worker, questioning, queer...Have I left you out? Each of these letters in the soup has its long and distinctive history both before and after Omnibus/Stonewall, both on-screen and off.

(10)

Waugh is also concerned with queer cinema's tackling of the outer limits of sexuality, those practices and identities still considered taboo, ranging from

"bug chasing [sex where one partner deliberately risks HIV infection]...[to] the numerous fetishes around which micro-identities have been constituted" (11).

Chapters three and four limit their analysis to four films apiece -- always two English and two French -- in an effort to achieve the much sought after parity of comparison. This works well, though the films in chapter three are so obscure that I wonder if they truly do, as Waugh asserts, really offer us early glimpses of sexual diversity beyond heterosexuality. It is possible that only Waugh can tell us. However, I am now powerfully interested in viewing the films he mentions: *Wow!* (Claude Jutra, 1969), *Don't let the angels fall* (George Kaczender, 1968), *Jusqu'au coeur* (Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, 1968) and *Prologue* (Robin Spry, 1969). Chapter four tackles four films from the 1960s and 1970s, with queer concerns at their core. Despite international attention at the time of their release, *À tout prendre* (Claude Jutra, 1963), *Il était une fois dans l'est* (Andre Brassard, 1973), *Winter Kept Us Warm* (David Secter, 1965) and *Outrageous!* (Richard Benner, 1977) "are...seldom revived and have resisted canonisation" (87) and yet Waugh's descriptions and the inclusion of stills and posters for the films pique one's interest. Waugh's unbridled enthusiasm makes us want to see these films. He ends this chapter with an important indication of the historical trajectory of the two solitudes of Canadian queer cinema "in which Montreal's queer cinema would one day most characteristically explore the perils of private intimacy...and Toronto would explore the assertion of public rights" (96).

Chapter five focuses on the juxtaposition of rural and urban settings, as depicted in queer coming of age films. The significance of the rural setting as pastoral ideal has a substantial history of representation in Canadian cinema, particularly within lesbian films. It would be interesting to apply this in relation to a discussion of something like *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and its use of the rural landscape as both escape and site of surveillance and punishment. Chapter six details the fraught relationship of queer representation and Canada's National Film Board (NFB). Waugh himself is clearly a thorn in the side of the NFB, and while his concerns were and are legitimate with regard to queer representation in NFB products, his detailed accounts of run-ins with members of the NFB seem a trifle unwarranted: "when I threatened to initiate a lesbian and gay boycott of board products she [Isobel Marks, programming director for English production] looked at me as

if I had just started speaking Klingon" (154). Chapter seven is devoted entirely to the place of the male bonding film (mostly films about hockey) in the representation of queer masculinity, beginning with Waugh's personal confessional about the pleasures of swimming and voyeurism. His chapter on the tropes of sex and money is devoted partly to a large section on the work of Bruce LaBruce, in an attempt to redress LaBruce's excision from academic discourse in Canada. The highly personal nature of LaBruce's films, which sometimes deploy scenes of hardcore sex, has tended to relegate him to the marginal realms of porn and the avant-garde. Waugh's discussion of the burgeoning Canadian gay porn industry is illuminating, highlighting bilingual concerns and the use of strategic national motifs (unsurprisingly, the fetishisation of hockey equipment), even deploying the term "porn auteur" (244) in relation to the work of one William Duffault. Also highlighted are the efforts of lesbian video collectives in producing their own pornography. In the final section of this chapter, Waugh turns to John Greyson's seminal feature *Urinal* (1988), a densely visual documentary on bathrooms and the sex that takes place in them. Though perhaps dated in its video art style, *Urinal* is a film that continues to surprise and educate -- it certainly left an impression on me when I viewed it as an undergraduate in the late 1990s. Waugh argues for the importance of the toilet "as an abject and liminal zone whose non-productive energy confronts the mainstream political and economic regulation of sexuality with a transgressive politics of sexuality as pleasure and excess, waste and contestation" (255), exploring the visual trope of toilet sex in a number of features, ranging from *Night Zoo* (Jean Claude Lauzon, 1987) to *Better Than Chocolate* (Anne Wheeler, 1999). Waugh's penultimate chapter deals with the formidable impact of the AIDS crisis on Canadian queer filmmaking and representation. In this chapter, Waugh looks at one of the most remarkable and underseen films to come out of this period, *Zero Patience* (John Greyson, 1993), a low-budget musical based around dispelling an hypothesis that circulated for much of 1980s, that of a 'patient zero' in the spread of HIV. The final chapter in Waugh's book is an in-depth study of issues around the body, sexuality and shame, and the ways in which queer filmmakers have intervened to produce works that explore alternative notions of beauty, pleasure and understanding.

The latter section of the book functions as a selective encyclopaedia of some of the most exciting and important contributors to Canadian cinema of the last fifty years. To name but a few: listed here are the sublime Quebecois actor Lothaire Bluthéau who starred in Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (1989) and *Le Confessionnal* (Robert Lepage, 1995); director Deepa Mehta, whose recent film *Water* (Deepa Mehta, 2005) graced the 61st Edinburgh International Film Festival; and director Denys Arcand, whose film *The Barbarian Invasions* (2003) garnered praise at Cannes and the Oscars. Most gratifyingly for me, there is an entry here for Jay Scott, film reviewer for Canada's *Globe and Mail* newspaper until his untimely death in 1993 from AIDS, whose film reviews probably had the greatest impact on directing me towards a career in film studies.

This is an impressive and entertainingly written book of value to those examining the visual tropes and political concerns of queer cinema from a global perspective. There is also a wealth of information regarding the infrastructure that constitutes Canadian film funding and distribution from approximately the 1960s to the present.